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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Being the
BURGE MEMORIAL LECTURE
for the year 1934

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BURGE MEMORIAL TRUST

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YOU conferred high honour and privilege upon me when you invited me, as a representative of the oldest Church in Christendom, to address you on some subject within the terms of your Commemorative Trust. Such a theme, I gather from the material clause of the Trust Deed, must be calculated 'to forward the cause of international friendship through the Churches, and to promote a better and wider understanding of the international obligations of Christian peoples'. I have chosen the second more austere alternative, and wish to emphasize the duties that one nation owes to another alike in justice and in honour. Above all, I desire to give a supreme and enduring motive, rooted both in religious faith and in the human reason, for the existence and also for the discharge of the obligations that nation owes to nation. For it is my conviction that nothing, literally nothing, but real belief in the sovereignty of God, and the practice of that belief, can save the nations, I will not say from the 'Wrath to come' but from Disaster at hand and from irretrievable Ruin. And if this be true, it would seem that the faith of those who believe in the one Sovereign God will yet again be called upon, as in old time, to save the world from itself.

Nearly every great force in our lives works, you will notice, in unequal but opposite directions. Love, for instance, that can raise a man to his full stature, bringing with it understanding, gentleness, fineness of perception, and of spiritual vision, inculcating self-forgetfulness and willingness to sacrifice, may also make a man a trembling mass of self-centred dissatisfaction and a jealous maniac. The one mighty force may thus elicit not only what is noblest in us but also what is base. Similarly, ambition,

that may lead a man to tread the stars, daring all, may readily lead to ways of crookedness and dishonour. And what is true of individuals is true also of nations.

Nationality can bind a people together by ties as strong as Life, Love, and Death. There is the great link of kinship, inheritance, tradition, the feeling of oneness rooted in history, the knowledge or the fact, though it be unknown, of sufferings and of victories shared, the community of language with a thousand haunting beauties, of outlook, of custom and ideal, of interest and emphasis of interest, the inspiration of perceiving not by thought alone but by heart-beat and quickened pulse that a man belongs to the group and to the very soil where they sprang—these and a thousand other things to which neither poet nor patriot has given a name, can inspire a willingness to sacrifice and a love of country stronger even than love of family, mightier even than fear of Death.

But Nationality can also arouse in a people the very dregs of their nature. It may, in moments of crisis, convulsive fear, or exaltation, induce an utter blindness to goodness, honour, and truth. It may, even in the absence of any crisis, provoke a lust of self-assertion and a willingness to take unfair advantage, leading to flagrant injustice to other nations. 'The Sphere in which no Sovereignty *de jure* exists,' wrote Lord Bryce in his arresting lecture on Sovereignty, 'when all power is *de facto* only, is also the sphere in which morality has made least progress, and in which justice and honour are least regarded.'

Unfortunately, then, nationality that can prompt loyalty, courage, sacrifice, is often responsible for meanness of heart and narrowness of mind. Such baser promptings will effectively prevent men from understanding the outlook and aspiration of other peoples. Indeed the understanding will be marred by the vices both of Emphasis and Omis-

sion. Things that sort with their liking or prejudice will be noted, and given clamorous hearing. Things that might upset prepossessions will be utterly ignored. An unpleasant incident in a hated people will be immediately considered typical, while a typical unpleasantness in a friendly nation will be dismissed as individual idiosyncrasy. All is thus distorted by emphasis, much is omitted, and the whole is often little short of caricature or biting calumny. It is not, as the sceptics or cynics might say, that nationality can only see 'the straight staff bent in the pool'. It is rather that it can see neither staff nor pool, neither crookedness nor straightness, nothing in fact but a fringe of rushes because they evoke some interest.

Think for a moment how love of country and national enthusiasm has led historians to pardon every manner of offence, provided only it led to victory or success. They have often jettisoned every principle of good and evil, every basic idea of morality, every vestige of honour, in discussing the life of a national hero or a significant national event. Theirs has thus been an unblushing ethic of success and sacred selfishness, and they have sometimes proved themselves better Machiavellians than Machiavelli, who also was an historian.

It is useless to remark that historians are not moralists: we are all, perforce, moralists. Some ethic each historian will necessarily have, even though it be but negative; and in his writings, by epithet, by silence, by rebuke, praise, or condemnation, by lengthy treatment or summary dismissal he will give more than a hint of his inner scale of moral values. How rarely in the treatment of a national or popular hero or of a national event do we feel that the judgement is based upon considerations of justice and honour!

It were easy to pour scorn on the meanness and injustice, the sheer pettiness of outlook, that national feeling

may provoke. The world has grown so contracted and interlocked within our time that such attitudes between European nations seem as foolish as a feud between Devon and Cornwall or as a faction between neighbouring villages peopled by kinsmen. But I forbear, as ridicule can kill everything, including goodwill. I choose rather to discuss a nobler and mightier reason for avoiding viciousness in nationalism. For to cure this evil which generates the mistrust that is poisoning not only our lives but the very wells of our civilization, there is one remedy. If self-interest however enlightened had been able to rescue the nations from this calamity, it has had time enough to do its work. If an ordinary sense of justice, or of honour, in whose fair name many a foul deed has been done for nations, could have wrought a cure, it might across the centuries have made some beginning. The evil, I believe, can be cured only by steadfast and real belief in the sovereignty of God, fount of justice and honour alike in men and nations. Let me then strive to justify this conviction.

You asked me to speak as a representative of the Catholic Church. Let me remind you therefore of one of our absolutely fundamental beliefs, namely that we by the light of reason alone can show that God exists. Thus without reference to authority, be it of person or belief, without reference, direct or veiled, to revelation or religion, we firmly believe that philosophy can establish the existence of God. Indeed without such a belief, without such an introduction, it would be impossible to set up a reasonable apologetic for Christianity. Deprived of such a beginning in reason, any apologetic—and how many have been tried!—would perforce begin and end in mist, in the circular movements of the lost, or in blind, though possibly heroic ventures of trust. Philosophy in which for us fact, experience, experiment, law, and reason alone play a part,

may thus lay proud claim to being a torch-bearer. And down the years our philosophers have borne their torches nobly.

There is not with us, be it noted, a God-hypothesis—I wonder how one would pray to a God-hypothesis in moments of anguish!—nor any delicate suggestion that a God may perhaps be the least unacceptable solution of life's tangled problems. We do not hold that the existence of God is a reputable theory, dignified by age, which may yet prove tenable. We assert without provocation but with great definiteness, that a careful study of fact and law, a close scrutiny of principle and reason, will lead any unbiased person ineluctably to the conclusion that God exists. You will note in passing that, with our arms wide open to fact and truth whencesoever they come, we Christians are the real rationalists in history, though others may lay claim to our title.

You will not expect that a proof of God's existence can be offered in a few hurried words ending with a 'pat' conclusion. Physics and chemistry lead our philosophers to the study of cosmology, just as the biological sciences drive them to psychology or the philosophy of the organic world. Both cosmology and psychology lead to metaphysic which studies all reality, organic and inorganic, in its nature and causes. And metaphysic, the philosophy of being and cause, leads us to the last effort of our speculative flight, the existence of God, who is the Necessary Being and First Cause. The vision, it will be noted, is the reward of much labour and long study.

Doubtless some who, perusing the argument in its final stages, would like to be convinced are yet denied this conviction. Similarly they might miss the point of some prolonged physical inquiry into the constitution of the atom, or of some case stated by engineer, lawyer, or mathematician. Their loss is not due to lack of goodwill,

but possibly to lack of training and of acquired knowledge. Besides, not all minds have a metaphysical and speculative bent, and not all metaphysician's minds are bent truly. In any case, I have delayed for a few moments over this highly significant fact, for I consider that this absolutely fundamental belief across so many centuries of many hundreds of millions of people, including the learned, the sceptical, the critical, the saints, mystics, philosophers, theologians, historians, might prove perhaps to have no parallel as a consensus of belief in the long history of human thought.

The God whose existence is thus proven is not an all-pervading something, not merely an actuating principle of the world, nor another name for the sum total of all Reality. He is a Spirit who knowing Himself utterly and infinitely, and knowing all things that are or may be in Himself, is Providence, Judge, Lord, and Sovereign of all things. Much of our knowledge of God is negative: that He is not like matter in nature or function, that He is not bounded by space nor measurable by time, that He knows no limits to the perfection of His Being. Some of our knowledge is analogical, that He is the Supreme Goodness, that His knowledge is a complete and infinite seizure of Being, that His Will is omnipotent. Whatever our knowledge be, and however inadequate to the infinite wonder of the Godhead, only those who have pursued the long philosophic inquiry can ever imagine the transports of vision that open at the close. It is almost as though after long months of climbing, we had reached a summit where, in a hushed silence, God communicated to us something of His Being, and from which we saw the Universe lying before us, magnificent and enthralling in its true perspective. To those who have pursued the inquiry, through the slow and patient years, the words of the poet—'all the world's aflame with God'—seem but matter of simple

fact, and the conviction throbs that the 'proper study of mankind is'—God.

In the course of these studies one pivotal fact is established with luminous clearness, viz. that the act of God is required for every change that takes place in the Universe from end to end. Ours is in deed and truth the philosophy of change, as change is the fact from which we begin and over which we linger. All the things that we know consume their short existence in and through Change. But when the final scrutiny has been effected, we are driven by every fact and every law that we know to see that no change can ever render a full account of itself. Not any force nor agent, nor a multiplicity of energies, nor yet the sum total of all known Causes can render a full account of any one of those myriad Changes, great or small, which form the warp and woof not only of our lives but of the universal movement. We, eminently changeable beings, stand facing, and but partly understanding, a changing Universe. Not one change in that vast theatre, however, can be understood without reference to the immediate actuation of God.

This is a belief that lies at the very heart of the great religions of Jewry and Christianity. It is a truth which reason can establish in no uncertain way. Not therefore at a distance, nor in obscurity, do we seek our God. He is nigh unto us, serenely moving all things in the ceaseless outpouring of His unimpeded activity.

It is this God, whose existence is proven, whose Nature is not unknown, who rules and governs all that He moves, and actuates as Sovereign Lord. He is the Judge of nations and men. Sovereign authority is for the lawyer 'that person or body to whose direction the law attributes legal force, the person in whom resides, as of right, the ultimate power either of laying down general laws or of issuing isolated commands, whose authority is that of the Law

itself'. In that sense truly is God the ultimate Sovereign of all men and of all nations. In addition He made all and moves all, and naught that they contemplate, plan, or achieve is possible without His Power. How, therefore, can He fail to be Sovereign both of individuals and of nations, when their existence and activity are alike immediately and utterly dependent upon Him? Indeed with any other known conception or fact of sovereignty there is no parallel—so complete and unquestionable is the sovereignty of God.

How then does this fact and truth of God's sovereignty, to which I have referred with such unconvincing brevity, affect the obligations which one nation owes to another?

Nations in treating one another have, as we earlier suggested, a way of emancipating themselves from all the rules of right and wrong, and from all the standards of honour. They pass with lightning rapidity 'beyond good and evil', and shake themselves free of every restraint in their lust for power. In so doing they ignore the commands of God and degrade our human nature—thus defying God's sovereign authority.

In passing, have you observed how even small groups of men like a Cabinet will do jointly what none of them would contemplate singly? Each may be a man of a certain uprightness, with an honourable record, and yet all together may pursue a plan of crookedness or injustice. There is a collective irresponsibility, immorality, and dishonour of governmental groups which needs not only careful study but also systematic denunciation. Indeed, the morality of groups, the responsibility of each, the ease of participation by each in the guilt or crime of all requires no little elucidation—for on the morality, sense of duty, and responsibility of governments our lives and the hope of our civilization depends. We have laughed in public and in private long enough at what a government or Cabinet

has not: it is time we insisted on what it must have—conscience.

Nations then definitely ignore or even deny God's sovereignty in refusing to be bound by the moral law, as though that law could be evaded with impunity. The truth is far otherwise.

We human beings have a definite nature, and by the fact that we have a nature, we have a law. Much of that law—of the whole law of our nature—on its physical, biological, physiological side we perforce obey. There remains a select sphere of action in which we are free to choose, free, though the struggle be against overwhelming odds. The Moral Law is thus seen to be the law of our human nature which, proclaimed authoritatively within us, guides our free activities and decisions. It proclaims the law of our growth and development: it warns against influences or acts which might impede or warp our full life. While our nature remains what it is, that moral law must remain the same.

Thus men who view the moral law as an arbitrary collection of injunctions, or an irritating list of 'do's' and 'don'ts', have lost touch altogether with its origins in the depths of our very nature. That Law is the natural guide to peace, happiness, and fulfilment: it is the natural warning against disaster. Just as our instincts which well up from our nature may be destined to save us in crisis, so our practical judgements of good and evil, announced by conscience, which proclaims the moral law with such uncompromising brevity of command, spring from our nature and are destined to save us from dislocation or disruption.

Of this moral law, which indicates the way of life, God is the Judge as He, the maker of our nature, is ultimately the maker of the law. Indeed, had I time I might indicate how the moral law which directs each of us to his own good and to the common good of all, is in truth some participation in the Divine Eternal Law. I forbear lest

I carry you into the very 'arcana' of metaphysic. The truth, however, is simple to state. Nations and men, if they would achieve greatness and goodness, if they would escape futility and disaster, must obey the law of our nature. Not until they forgo their emancipation from restraint, by recognizing the Sovereignty of God in all questions of good and evil, can we hope to live in peace, or to garner what life offers.

From morality I pass to consider Honour. As the sovereign King is fount of honour in the civil state, so, in this His Universe, is God the Sovereign, fount of all honour, and fount alike of the laws and maxims which make for the honourable life.

These are the laws which lift our lives out of the slough of meanness, littleness, and self-interest, which give a beauty, a serenity, and even some romance to our days. They are the laws that are most openly flouted by nations in their relations one with another.

By honour we are bound to keep faith, and we break our word at the peril of dishonour. With nations it would appear to be different. The broken word will be explained, 'interpreted', praised, or even shown to be a rule of state-craft. Scarcely a state now keeps faith with another, unless it be for motives either of self-interest or fear. Both the law and the motive of honour have long been forgotten.

By honour we are bound to avoid anything that is unduly and disproportionately self-seeking. We seek ourselves, as we perforce must, but we do not and may not forget the existence of other selves with their own indestructible rights. Those other selves or persons are not to be used for motives of our own self-interest nor for vanity, ambition, or power. So fast does this rule of honour bind that we are at pains never to appear self-seeking lest men turn from us in scorn. Nations and states, on the other hand, proclaim the doctrine of sacred selfish-

ness, or at least act upon it without hesitation and without fear of rebuke. Nothing will restrain them unless it be their own interest or subsequent advantage. 'Seek ye first your own Kingdom and its expansion', the rule of nations would seem to run, 'and much shall be added unto you.'

Lastly, by honour we are commanded never to take an unfair advantage of whatsoever kind, whether it be of knowledge or ignorance, poverty or wealth, weakness or power. What is thus definitely forbidden to all individuals, who lay store by honour, is practised extensively by nations. Not an unfair advantage, of market or price, of weakness or fumbling that would not be seized at once. The seizure might provoke misgivings in a few sensitive minds, but the government that acted thus dishonourably would look to be saluted for its vision and heroism. The appropriate party would thunder applause, for parties applaud themselves with unblushing vulgarity, while the party papers would emphasize the antecedent provocation and the self-restraint of the offenders. The writers of the less fugitive word would rehearse the old Machiavellian arguments of 'moral necessity' and 'self-defence'. Clearly if there be honour among thieves, there is little between nations.

If there be another canon of personal honour, it might surely run that we may never attribute dishonourable motives lightly. Nations treat one another differently. Everything new must be immediately misunderstood, and the mean self-seeking or aggressive motive must be attributed with all swiftness so that the other may be placed at the disadvantage at least of explaining itself.

None who has closely studied the course of the last unsteady twenty years of history is likely to see in these statements anything but the unvarnished truth. The relations of nations to one another have never been

hallowed, and assuredly they have never been studied in the light of justice and honour. Where in the long national records of broken faith, of the broken word, of lust for expansion, of unfair advantage to friend and foe alike, can we discern even a hint of belief in the Sovereignty of God?

The world is old, but it has learnt little. Experience is not transmissible, and each generation learns anew what has been learnt and forgotten a thousand times in human history. At the moment the world is in sore need of some belief, some truth which may prevent the nations from becoming locked in a snarling, ignoble struggle; for that struggle will mean the end. All that we have saved from the past, our culture, our wisdom, our perception of beauty and love of truth, the very fountain of our civilization—all is now endangered.

And all is in danger not because our civilization does not embody the enduring truths of our race and peoples, not because the nations want war, not because war can settle anything, but simply because no one nation can trust another. It is this calamitous mistrust of the nations which darkens our days and threatens manifold disaster. A pact which might mean much is followed by an agreement that might mean more, and both are declared in fact to mean little as we lay the trails of powder across the scarred and terrified face of the Earth.

That mistrust, in its effect like a permanent panic fear, has arisen because nations have abandoned the laws of morality and the code of honour. It can only disappear, and with it the ghastly spectre of destruction, if the nations once again acknowledge the binding force of these great rules of conduct, by active belief in the sovereignty of the living God. Such belief will involve a complete change of mind and heart which, judged by all the portents, is centuries overdue.

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